

How to support your child when someone special has died



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How to support your child through a death

As parents our instinct is to always protect our children from pain and distress. Sometimes we can't prevent this when someone close to them is dying. By shutting them out, even if we don't mean to, it can make the pain worse and harder to cope with.

"A child can live through ANYTHING so long as he/she is told the truth, and is allowed to share with loved ones the natural feelings people have when they are suffering." - Eda Le Shan

This leaflet contains some general principles which we would recommend to help you through this difficult experience.



Before Death

- **Include children in communication**

Tell them what is happening to reduce confusion. Use words and explanations they can understand. Be open, sensitive and honest. Admit when you don't know some of the answers to their questions.

- **Minimise separation**

Allow children to visit their relatives if they want to. Seeing is believing for children and can often be the best way to allow them to understand what is happening.

- **Reassurance is important**

Let children know that they are not responsible for the illness and it is not catching.

- **Include children in the care if they want to**

- **Use resources**

Don't be afraid to ask for help and support from friends, family and the community, including school, for you and your child.

After death

Attending the funeral can help the grieving process for children. It is important to give your child the choice of whether to view the body and/or attend the funeral.

Saying goodbye

Sometimes it's helpful for a child to have the opportunity to see their close relative after they have died and say 'goodbye'. They can leave a special drawing or object to remain with them. It's important to prepare them, and to let them know that the dead person will look like they are asleep, but that they will feel cold and stiff.

Attending the funeral

- Talk to them about what is involved.
- Let them know that they can change their minds - at any time. Check that they are happy with the choice they've made - but not too often, because children want to please and may say what they think you want to hear.
- If they want to attend, plan to have someone with them who can act as their supporter for the funeral. This may be an aunt or uncle or one of your best friends. This allows you to be fully present at the funeral for your own sake.
- Give them clear and detailed information about what will happen; this will involve explanations about the difference between, for example, burials and cremations. If it fits with your own beliefs, it will help if the child has had some preparation about the difference between the body of the person and the part that made them who they were. Some people call this a soul, or a spirit, or love, or 'what was special about daddy' or 'what we will remember about daddy or grandma.'
- Reassure them that it is **all of the body** of the person who has died that is being buried or cremated. Some young children are confused and wonder what happens to the head, arms and legs.

- Give reassurances that the person who has died can no longer feel anything, so they will not feel the flames nor will they be scared of being buried.
- Offer clear and detailed explanations of what to expect from people at the funeral. Some children can be shocked that people seem to have a party after someone has died; others are upset when people say: 'How lovely to see you'. Explain that this doesn't mean that these people are happy that the person has died - they're just the sort of things that adults say.
- Equally, seeing adults in deep distress may alarm children but preparation beforehand will help them understand that this is a reasonable response to the huge thing that has happened.



Remembering

Children really value opportunities to feel close and connected to important people who have died. By helping them record their memories you can help them make sense of what has happened and cherish the memories of their special relative.

Here are some suggestions:

Making a memory box

Including:

- Letters and short stories
- Small objects with special meaning e.g. shells from beach trips
- Photos
- Drawings
- Personal items

Making a Memory Book

Making a Calendar of Memories

By making a list of important dates, you can help the child remember these dates with special meaning, and cope better when they occur. Plan to do something special together on these dates to recall happy memories. Allow time and feelings to both cry and laugh.

Making a Christmas Bauble

Please ask for a member of the team for an instruction sheet.

Useful websites

Winston's Wish - a charity for bereaved children, young people and their families.

www.winstonswish.org.uk

riprap - When a parent has cancer

www.riprap.org.uk

Cancerbackup - Practical advice for coping with cancer related issues.

www.cancerbackup.org.uk

CRUSE - supporting you after the death of someone close.

www.cruse.org.uk

Compassionate Friends - supporting families after a child dies.

www.compassionatefriends.org

Winston's Wish - help for bereaved children and their families.

www.winstonswish.org.uk

Child Bereavement Trust - charity with online information for young people who've been bereaved.

www.childbereavement.org.uk

We hope that you have found this leaflet helpful.

Other St Oswald's Bereavement Support publications which you/your child might find useful:

- Bereavement Support
- What to do when your relative or partner dies
- Dealing with grief in your teens
- Coping with the loss of a child
- Funeral advice

If you have any queries or comments please do not hesitate to contact a member of the Bereavement Support Team on 0191 285 0063 ext 2008.

Find us on:



We are a registered charity and rely on voluntary donations and legacies to enable us to care for patients and families.

This leaflet is available in a range of formats. Please ask a member of our team if you require a different format. Thank you.

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